

**By ALICE WALTON
City News Service**

LOS ANGELES (CNS) - Finding high-quality doctors and nurses to work at Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Hospital continues to be a problem, especially as the hospital teeters on the brink of closing, Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke said in a recent interview with City News Service.

The long-time supervisor, whose district includes the hospital, talked about possible fixes in an interview with City News Service, just a day after she and her four colleagues contingency plan for closing the troubled county-run hospital, which was built in the wake of the 1965 Watts riot to serve the poor and uninsured in the southern part of the county.

The Board of Supervisors agreed to maintain services at current levels pending the completion of a survey by the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Calls to close MLK-Harbor have come from the people least connected to it, Burke said.

"The public reaction, I find, is in reverse proximity to the hospital. People who live near the hospital are really scared it's going to close and they don't see alternatives," Burke said.

Despite the attention focused on lapses in patient care, "they didn't lose any people going to the emergency room. Some of them are sitting up in the waiting room reading the L.A. Times articles. People don't have choices. "Now, people over in my other areas, Culver City, they're constantly telling me to close the hospital."

A 43-year-old woman, Edith Rodriguez, who was ignored by emergency room personnel while complaining of intense abdominal pain died May 9 of a perforated bowel just outside the ER after hospital staffers called county police to take her away. Burke said she did not believe those hospital workers who ignored Rodriguez -- video showed a maintenance man mopping around her as she lay on the floor -- were representative of the overall workforce at the hospital.

"I don't think there are a lot of people out there like that. I think that you have very few people who would just allow someone to sit there," Burke said.

"You find a few callous people everywhere. You know, we've seen examples of this in New York, in Israel, every place where you see people in need of help and everybody just walks passed. Of course, they're not in a hospital where their responsibility is to care. But, I don't believe that you have other people there, or many people anywhere, who would ignore something like that."

Staffing continues to be a problem at MLK-Harbor, Burke said. When the hospital was put under the leadership of Harbor-UCLA Medical Center last year, health officials said under-performing employees would be let go and only those with a good or competent evaluation would remain on staff. But not enough turnover or training ever took place, Burke said. "It's like why can't you go and get people to work in the liquor store in South Central Los Angeles," Burke said. "It's just not that easy to get people who are skilled to want to come back (to the area). There's some that say, OK, I became a doctor, I became a nurse; so I could go back home and service people in my community. But, it just doesn't translate as it should."

At one time, Burke opposed creating a medical advisory board to oversee

management of the county hospitals, out of fear it would become another lobbying group looking for county funds. Now, the supervisor said she is no longer opposed to the idea.

“We're not professionals. We react politically. We react in terms of what the pressures are and saving face and all of those things, but you do have to listen to the professionals somewhat,” Burke said. A motion by Supervisors Gloria Molina and Mike Antonovich to start the process of closing MLK-Harbor's emergency room was not put to a vote yesterday, despite reports that a majority of the board was ready to vote on a plan for phasing out the hospital.

Burke said an article in the Los Angeles Times, which quoted three county supervisors as saying they were ready to close the hospital, caused unnecessary confusion. “I think unfortunately we were caught up in some questionable journalism. I don't know who said they were closing it, (but) what I read was that four people were ready to vote to close it,” Burke said.

“Now, when I heard that that's what was being said, I refused to talk to them, the L.A. Times -- absolutely refused.” The supervisor said that story overshadowed the hospital's good news this week: that CMS officials determined that the deficiencies that put the hospital in “immediate jeopardy” had been corrected.

“That was never a story, and that was very big,” Burke said. CMS inspectors will resurvey the hospital some time after July 9, and are expected to make a decision by Aug. 15.